

Section

4

Composition—
black and white

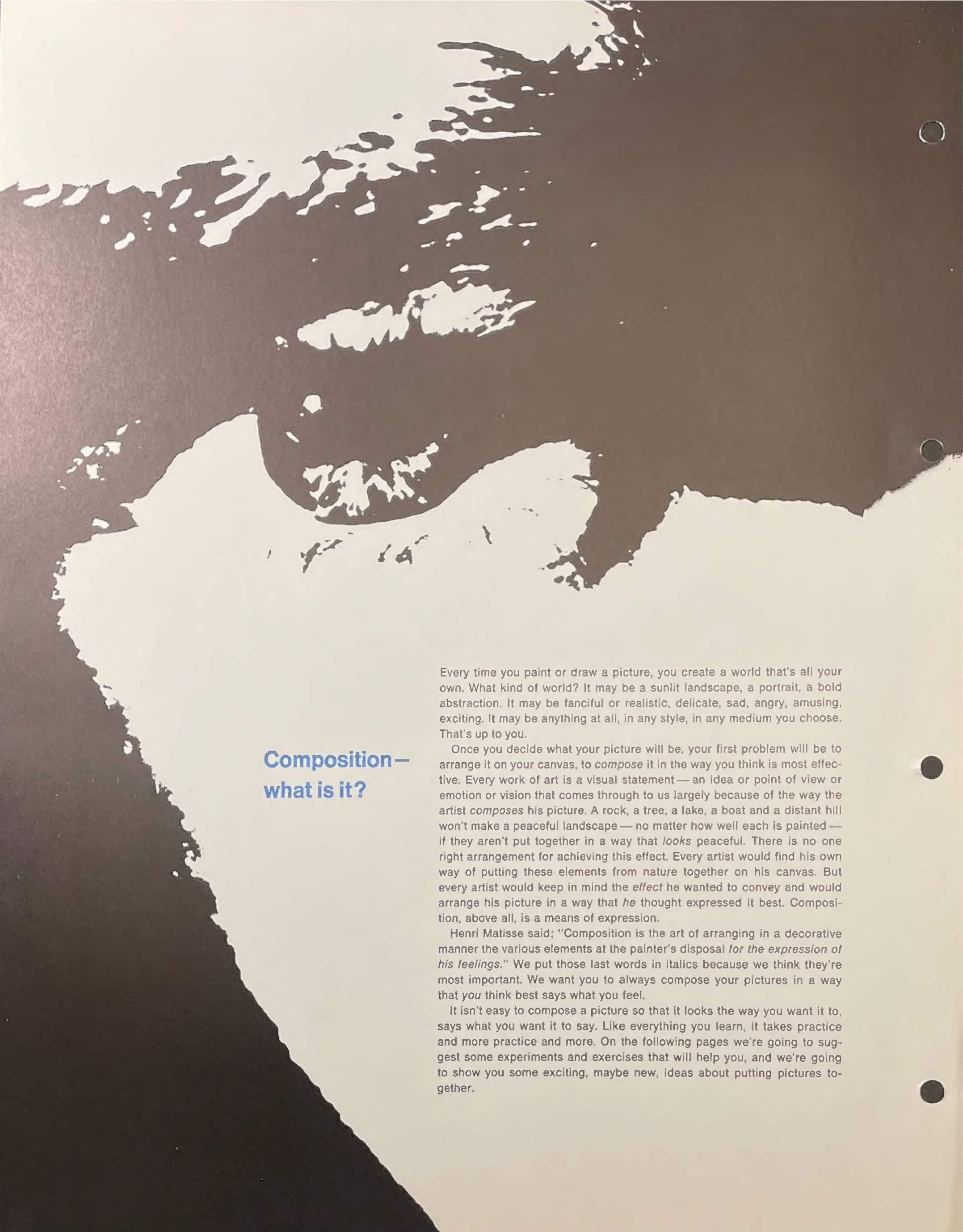
Guiding Faculty

Albert Dorne, Founder
[1904-1965]

Norman Rockwell
Al Parker
Ben Stahl
Stevan Dohanos
Jon Whitcomb
Robert Fawcett
Peter Helck
Austin Briggs
Harold Von Schmidt
George Giusti
Fred Ludakens
Bernard Fuchs
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Will Barnet
Syd Solomon
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Dick Cavalli
Whitney Darrow, Jr.
Rube Goldberg
Harry Haenigsen
Willard Mullin
Virgil Partch
Barney Tobey



Composition— what is it?

Every time you paint or draw a picture, you create a world that's all your own. What kind of world? It may be a sunlit landscape, a portrait, a bold abstraction. It may be fanciful or realistic, delicate, sad, angry, amusing, exciting. It may be anything at all, in any style, in any medium you choose. That's up to you.

Once you decide what your picture will be, your first problem will be to arrange it on your canvas, to *compose* it in the way you think is most effective. Every work of art is a visual statement—an idea or point of view or emotion or vision that comes through to us largely because of the way the artist *composes* his picture. A rock, a tree, a lake, a boat and a distant hill won't make a peaceful landscape—no matter how well each is painted—if they aren't put together in a way that *looks* peaceful. There is no one right arrangement for achieving this effect. Every artist would find his own way of putting these elements from nature together on his canvas. But every artist would keep in mind the *effect* he wanted to convey and would arrange his picture in a way that *he* thought expressed it best. Composition, above all, is a means of expression.

Henri Matisse said: "Composition is the art of arranging in a decorative manner the various elements at the painter's disposal *for the expression of his feelings*." We put those last words in italics because we think they're most important. We want you to always compose your pictures in a way that *you* think best says what you feel.

It isn't easy to compose a picture so that it looks the way you want it to, says what you want it to say. Like everything you learn, it takes practice and more practice and more. On the following pages we're going to suggest some experiments and exercises that will help you, and we're going to show you some exciting, maybe new, ideas about putting pictures together.

Suppose you want to paint a portrait of a friend . . .

In every picture you make, no matter what your subject or style, you'll be concerned with the basic problem in composition — how to put the things in your picture together so they work with each other and with the leftover spaces around them to convey clearly to the eye whatever it is you have to say. Artists call this *relating* the things in their pictures, and it is the first and most important step in composition.

The spaces around the elements in a picture are called the negative areas, or the negative shapes. The subject matter makes up the positive areas, or positive shapes. Positive and negative areas are equally important and must relate to each other in a way that will make your picture effective.

Let's see how this might work if you were composing a portrait of a friend.



First assume that the three elements above are the ones you decide to use in your portrait — your friend, a table and a window. In this arrangement they all relate to each other and to the large blank space simply because they are all in the same picture area. But there is no sense of order, no plan. Boy, table and window appear to have been stuck at random onto the canvas. You get the feeling they'd just float away in that vast space if it weren't for the boundary lines. How could you possibly tell by this arrangement what the picture is supposed to be about?



The picture to the left is much better. Your elements are in a far stronger relationship to each other, and the leftover space around them (the negative space) is an important part of the overall arrangement. But as a portrait the picture still isn't quite right. Because of the sizes and placement of the various elements, everything competes for our attention. There's still no way of telling for sure that this is a portrait of your friend.

This is better yet. You still have the three elements you started with — the boy, the table and the window. But now they work strongly together and with the negative shape around them to make an effective composition. There's no longer confusion about the subject of the picture. By moving the boy into the picture and making him a dominant, close-up element you create a warm, intimate portrait of your subject.



Compositions from five points of view

Nearly every good painting, since painting began, is first of all a good composition, built on a solid structure of shapes that create a unifying pattern on the flat picture plane. This is as true of a medieval fresco painted on the wall of an Italian chapel as it is of an abstraction painted yesterday afternoon. If you study the paintings on these pages you'll see that no matter how complex or realistic or abstract a composition may seem, a pattern of shapes is there, holding it all together.



Baptism of Christ, Piero della Francesca
Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees
The National Gallery, London

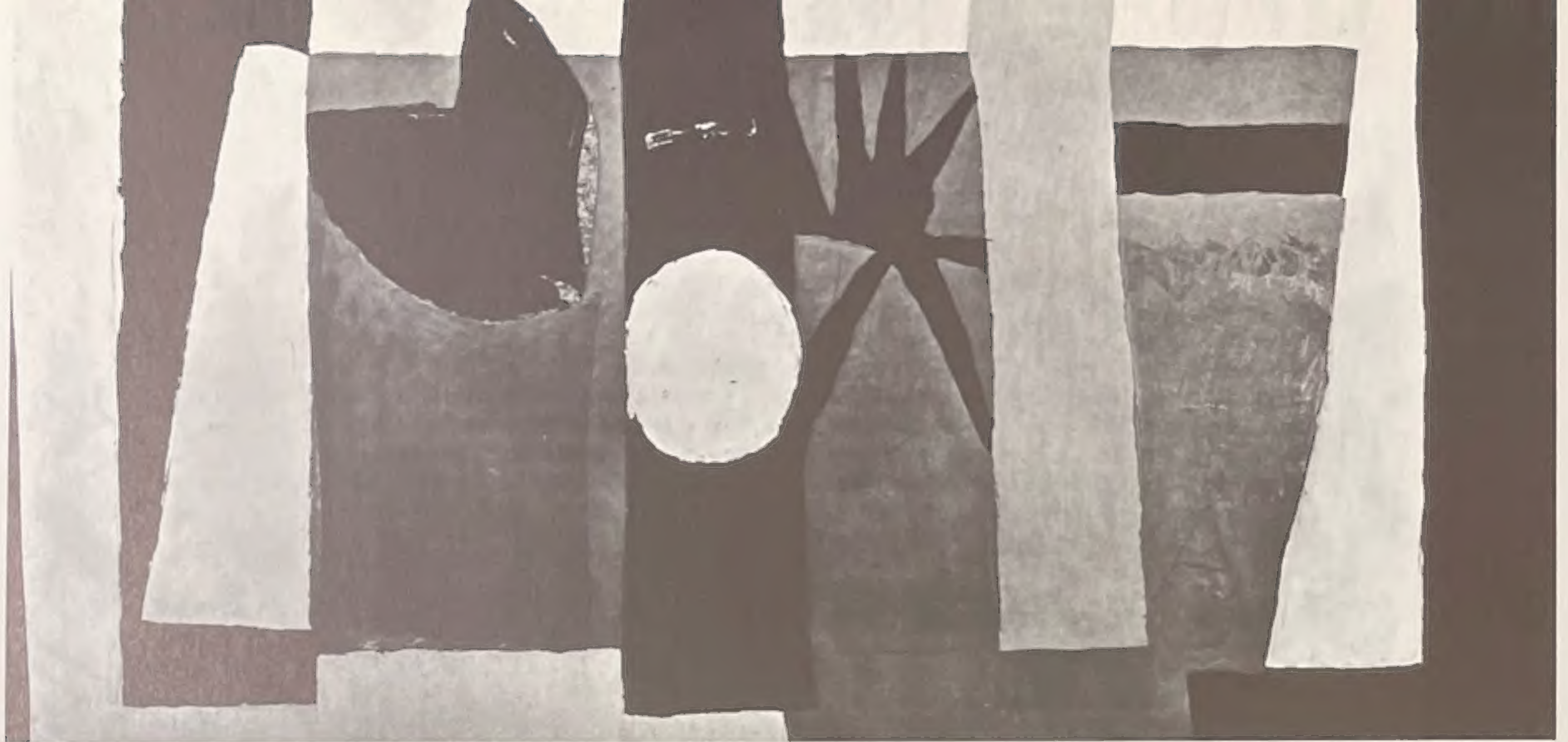


An underlying flow of quiet shapes, a careful symmetry characterize the design of this painting by the Renaissance artist Piero della Francesca. While he put many elements into his picture, the essential compositional shapes are large, well-balanced areas of darks and lights, arranged to lead our eye to the serene head of Christ.

Even though this painting is extremely realistic, it, too, has a strong pattern of abstract shapes. Note how the dark sides of the statues and the shadowy end of the violin become part of the background and create one large shape. See, too, how the composition is enlivened by the stripe shapes of the music in the foreground.



The Attributes of the Arts, Pierre Subleyras
Musée des Augustins, Toulouse



Here's a pattern that's easier to see. Robert Motherwell, a twentieth-century abstractionist, has found his own solution to the same compositional problem Francesca faced four hundred years ago: how to create a balance and unity of the different shapes within the area of his picture. You'll notice too that while these shapes are quite flat, the artist has set them against each other — has related them — in such a way that they seem to move slightly back into the picture, as though trying to create a sense of depth.

The Voyage, Robert Motherwell
Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, III

Neither realistic nor a complete abstraction, this painting is based on an arrangement of large, solid shapes that are fairly easy to see. *Woman with Newspaper* is an excellent study in balance. Do you see how dark shapes balance light ones, how a shape on the right side of the composition is offset by a similar shape on the left? Now look at the solid, dark shape of the hair, and see how it is balanced by the lighter, but busier, shapes on the newspaper directly below it.



Woman With Newspaper, Richard Diebenkorn
Courtesy of Poindexter Gallery, New York

Bamboo — Section of a Handscroll, Hsü Wei
Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, Freer Gallery of Art,
Washington, D.C.

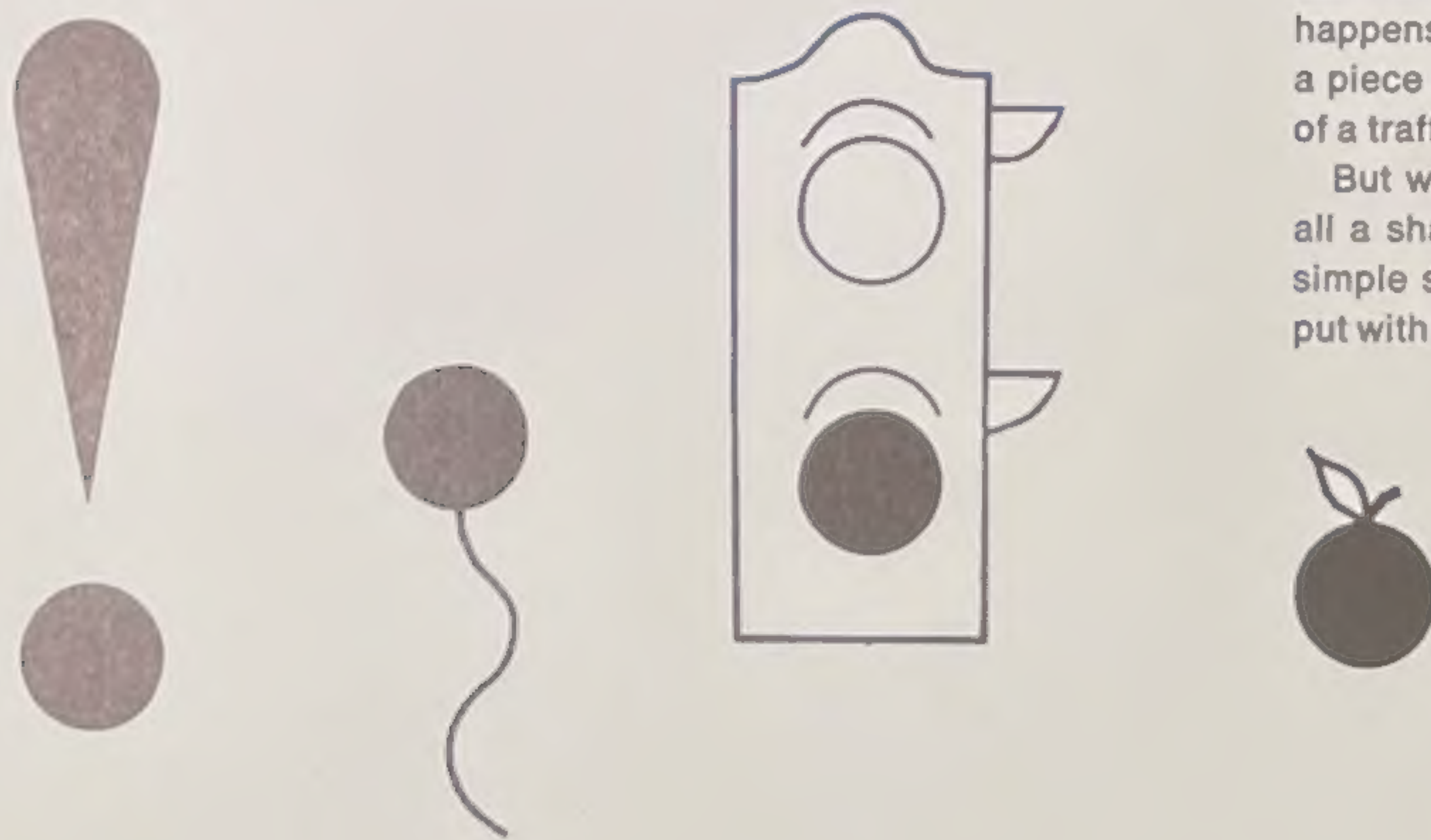


This section of a Chinese handscroll is a delicate balance of dark and light shapes. If you squint your eyes at the characters along the left edge, they will blend into one dark vertical shape which, as you'll see, is an important part of the overall design.

Now you know why the relationship of shapes and the patterns they create are important in picture-making.

On the next pages you'll get to practice relating some shapes yourself. We'll start with a . . .

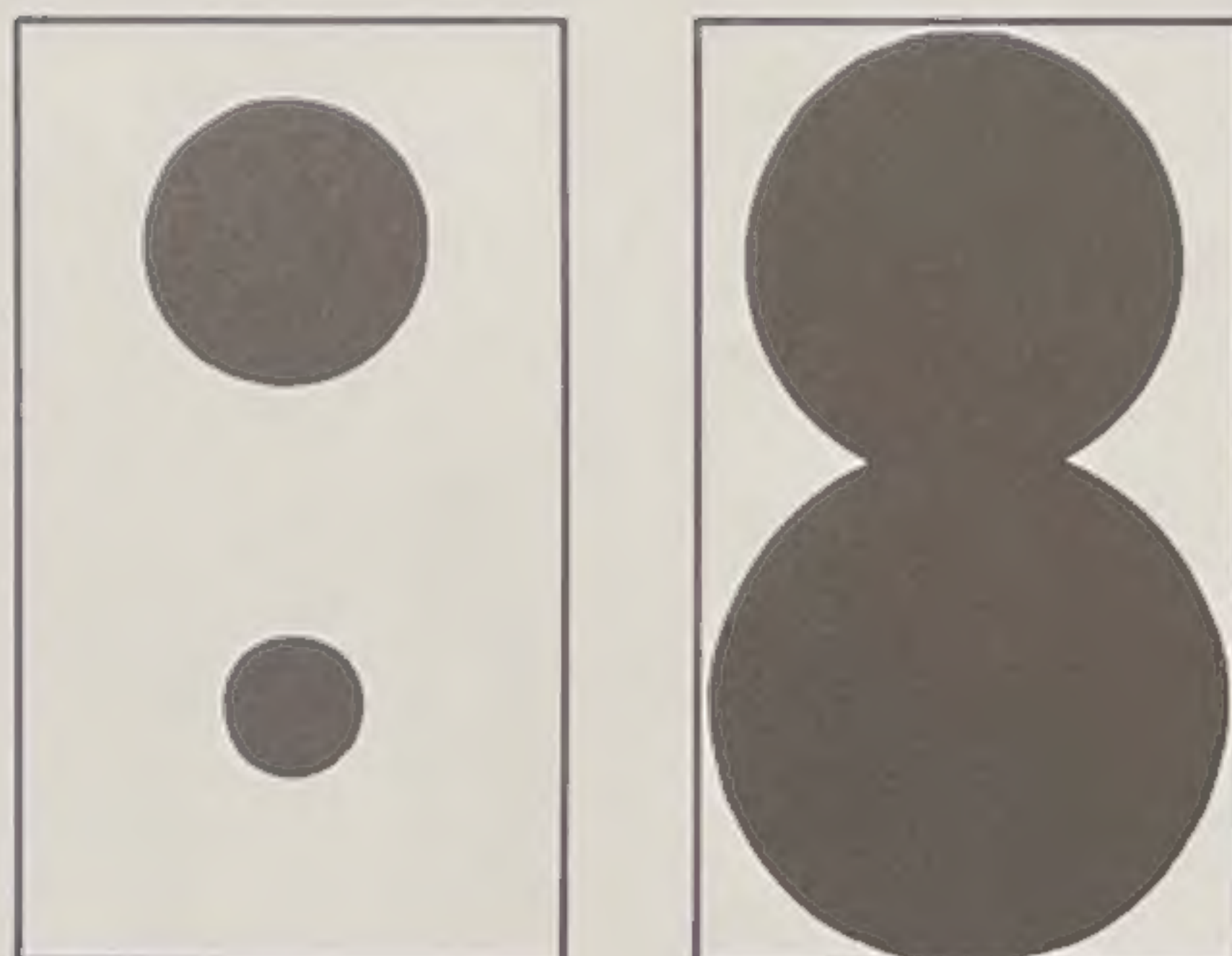
Let's start composing with a simple shape



It will help you in your picture-making if you can get into the habit of thinking of things as shapes, as artists do. When you're out sketching, be aware of the shapes of things you see, and imagine how they'd relate to each other as shapes. If you train yourself to think and see in this way, your subject matter will be easier to handle when you begin to arrange it in the picture area.

To get an idea of how shapes can be made to relate to each other, let's see what we can set in motion with dots. Without too much imagining, you could turn a dot into anything that happens to be circular. Give it a stem and it's an apple, add a piece of string and you have a balloon. It can become part of a traffic signal, too, or the base of an exclamation mark.

But whatever you might decide to make it, a dot is first of all a shape, and that's the way to think of it now. Even this simple shape can create a lot of visual excitement when it's put with other shapes inside a picture area.



Something happens when you put even two dots together. Leave enough space around them and they create the illusion of floating in air. When they fill the space, they seem to push against the sides of the picture area. One shape causes the other to react. It's almost as though they bring each other and the spaces around them to life.

In your picture-making, remember that shapes affect each other. Think carefully about what size to make each thing in your composition in relation to all the others so that together they best express whatever it is you want your picture to say.



When you group a number of shapes together in a picture, they create other shapes in the leftover areas. This is important to know and remember because when you compose a picture the "new" shapes (the leftover spaces) will be part of the pattern that will hold your composition together. Look closely at this arrangement of positive (black) and negative (white) shapes. You'll notice that the size and shape of each white diamond is determined by the closeness of the dots that enclose it. In places where

the dots are close together, the diamonds become hourglass shapes.

You can see that something else happens, too, when the dots close in. Those floating ones at left are clearly black dots on a white background, but do you see a change in relationships as your eye moves from left to right? At some point, the black shapes merge and become the background, and the white diamonds come forward. Shapes, negative and positive, affect and change each other.

Is It Op?

This isn't Op art—it isn't even art. But if you still doubt that shapes affect each other, this vibrant arrangement of dots and half dots should convince you. Any one of these shapes would be lifeless by itself, but put them together and they almost jump off the page, so strongly do they relate to each other and to the white spaces around them.

There's so much going on here you should look this over carefully. Note that the dots and half dots are arranged in the picture area in a way that creates dozens of white, or negative, shapes. How many can you find? There are diamonds—lopsided ones, squashed ones, squeezed ones. There are a couple of hourglasses and a star with a hole in the middle.

There are triangles and thin strips with scalloped edges.

There's the illusion of depth here, too. Look at the column of large dots to the left of center. Does it seem to be closer to the foreground than the rest of the composition? That's because the rows of half dots on either side of it seem to overlap and also diminish in size, making it look as though they're receding into the background.

You'll see much more going on; you'll see other shapes and combinations of shapes if you look long and hard enough. What we *really* want you to be aware of, though, is that shapes strongly affect each other when they're put together in a picture area.



Use these two shapes—the dot and the half dot—for your design.

Now see what you can make dots do

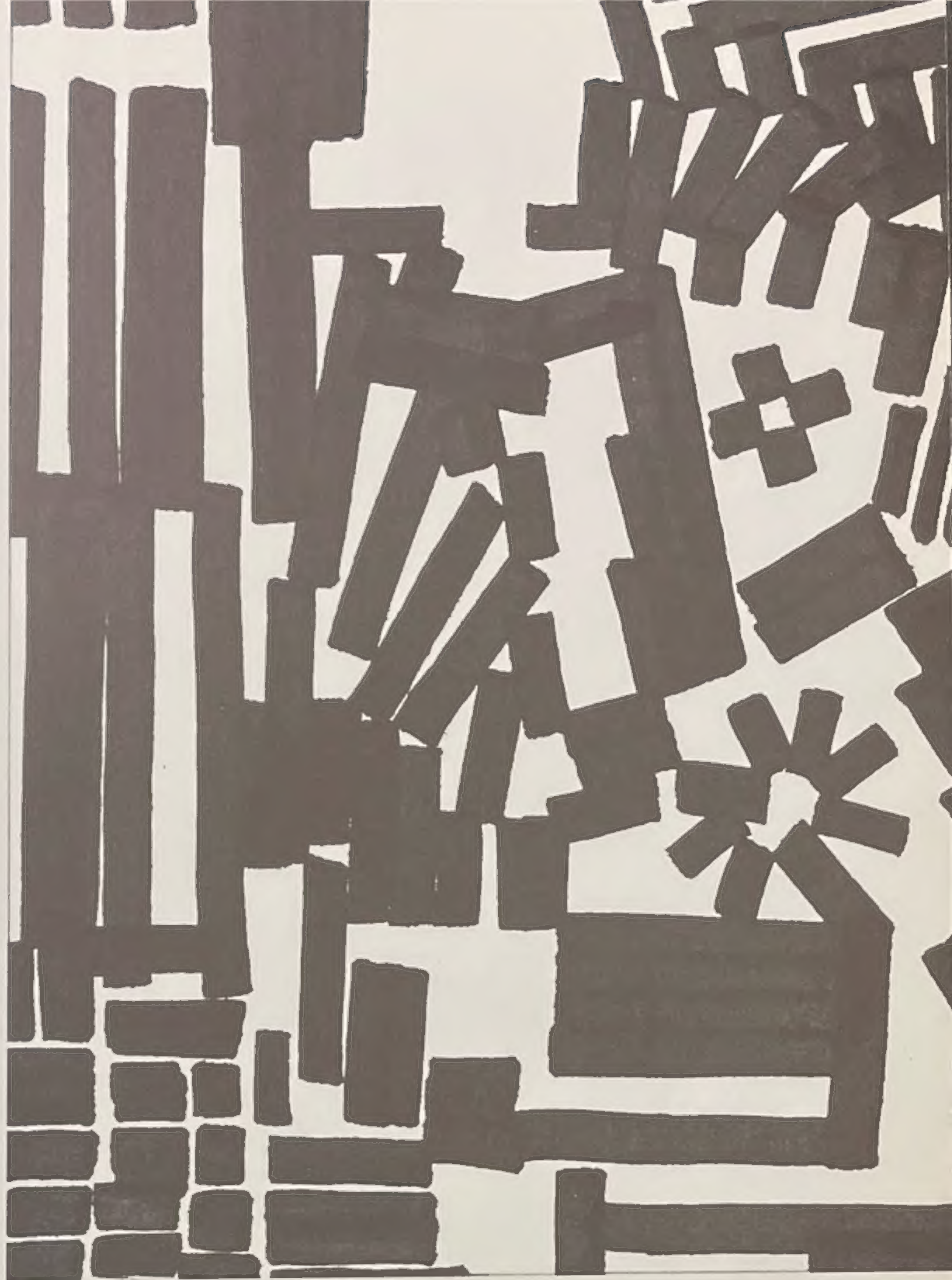
While it's fun to see what you can imagine in the pattern above, we don't want you to think this is only a game. Our purpose is to get you to realize how much visual excitement you can churn up with just a couple of simple shapes. Now we want you to try to make a similar pattern of your own. Make yours smaller, if you like, and less complicated. Or make it bigger. Use many different sizes of dots and half dots and be very conscious of the white leftover spaces between them. Play with your design, trying different combinations of dots, different arrangements on your picture page. Put all of them together in the busiest pattern you can

devise. Try making more than one, if you like. It's fun to work with cut-out pieces of paper, too. Just keep experimenting. As you relate the shapes to each other, note how even tiny adjustments can change the feeling and character of your design.

You can learn a lot from this exercise that will help you in your picture composing. For one thing, you'll get an idea of the visual effects you can create through the play of positive and negative shapes in your pictures. You'll understand, too, the importance of relating all the things that go into your picture, of making everything, every area, work as part of the total composition.

The magic in straight lines

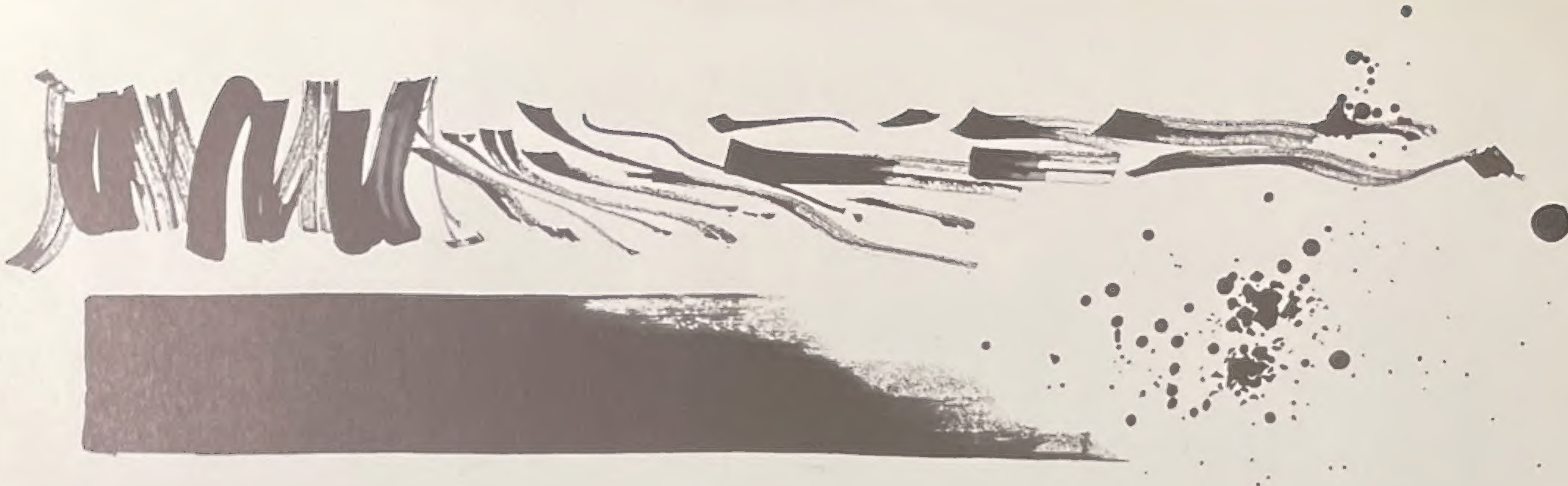
This composition is made with many variations on a single theme—the straight line. Fat, short, thin, straight, long, diagonal, horizontal, vertical lines—all put together into a dynamic design of positive and negative shapes. First, note the many different white shapes these black lines have created. There are triangles and squares, and one circle. There are many white line shapes, too, of different widths and lengths. Do you get a sense of depth when you look at this composition? Do the white areas seem to be in back of the black? Or is it the other way around? What about movement? The cross just to the right of center looks as though it's bouncing or floating in space, and the pinwheel below it seems just ready to start spinning. Some lines seem to be holding others up, too, and a few of them look about ready to topple over. In planning this design the artist was very conscious of the white shapes he was creating and of the relationships of all the shapes (black and white) to each other and to the picture area.



Make a line design

Now try a line design of your own. Use as many lines in as many widths and lengths as you want, remembering always that the negative shapes are equally as important to your composition as the positive ones. Use whatever medium appeals to you. We used a felt marker for our arrangement. It has certain advantages: It doesn't smudge, even when you use it with a ruler. Also, you can make lines of various widths with a felt marker. Turn the felt tip on edge for a thin line. For a broad one, draw several overlapping lines, one directly beneath the other.

Make several line designs. They'll give you an idea of the wide variety of effects you can create just by the ways you relate shapes within a picture area.



Shapes from your imagination

Now we want you to create some shapes of your own and use them in a composition. You'll need four or five sheets of paper, India ink and some of those unusual tools you experimented with in Section 1.

First, cover all the sheets of paper with groups of ink marks. The kinds of marks you make will be up to you — we've made some above to give you an idea of what we mean. Those across the top of the page were drawn with a twig about the size of a pencil. We made the broad horizontal line with the edge of a piece of cardboard, dragged quickly across the paper. You get those spattered dots by flicking the ink stopper at the paper.

After the ink is thoroughly dry, cut and tear the sheets of paper into pieces of assorted shapes and sizes. Then choose

fifteen or twenty varied ones (fat, thin, torn, smooth, rounded, angular) and arrange them on a piece of paper or cardboard. Keep shuffling the shapes around until you come up with an arrangement you like. Remember, the leftover areas of white will be shapes, too, and equally as important to your arrangement as the cut and torn ones. If one shape or another looks too heavy or too black in your arrangement, try covering part of it with a smaller shape of white paper.

When you're satisfied that your arrangement looks the way you want it to, paste it down. Then start all over and make another one. Experimenting with shapes in this way is good exercise for your imagination. It will give you a better understanding of shape relationships, too, which we already know is essential in picture-making.





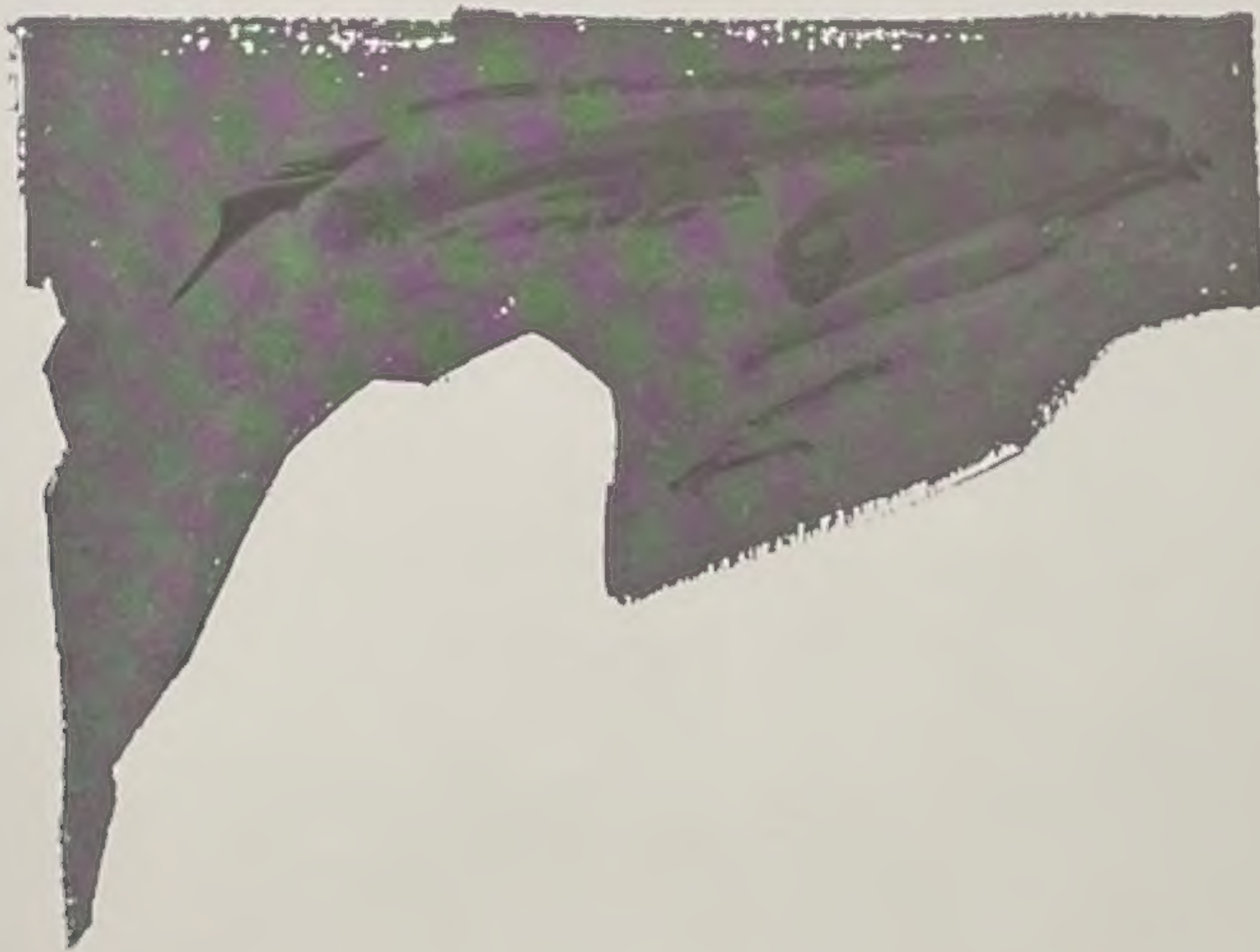
Relate real things as shapes, too

So far you've been working with purely abstract shapes in your compositions. The two pictures on this page, stripped down to their basic-shape skeletons, suggest real subjects — a still life (*at top*) and a seascape (*below*). They're here to remind you why the exercises you've been practicing are important to you and your development as an artist. Whether you're working with abstract shapes or realistically, your compositions will require exactly the same ingredient: an arrangement of shapes — negative and positive — in a unified, balanced pattern on the flat picture area.

We hope that by now all this practice you've been getting has made you so shape-conscious you'll never look at things

again without seeing them as shapes, too. From now on, when you go to your canvas, you won't be able to just plunk things into your pictures wherever they happen to fall. Your experience and practice in relating shapes will have made you aware that *everything* in a picture has meaning — the things you put into your pictures *and* the spaces around them as well.

While relating shapes is the first step in composing, never think that it's an end in itself. Composition is a means of expression, and your arrangement of positive and negative shapes should always be designed to help convey what you want your picture to say.





Photograph by Harry Garfield



Look for the shapes in nature

In Section 3, you remember, we talked about training your eye to see shapes in the world around you. By now we hope that whenever you draw or paint anything, you start by studying its shape. Is it long or short? Tall? Thin? What about the outlines? Are they smooth? Bumpy? Angular? Remember always, it's the shape, the descriptive outline, of a person, a bush, a barn that you will transfer from nature to paper with your pencil, pen or brush.

There are other, subtler shapes that are important to find, too, when you see something you want to draw. These are the shapes of light and shadow within the overall shape. Can

you see the light and dark shapes in the photographs of the girl's head and the vase of flowers? You can if you squint your eyes at these pictures. In each case, you'll see a pattern of lights and darks similar to the arrangements in the diagrams to the right of each photograph.

From now on we want you to be as conscious of these dark and light shapes-within-shapes as you are of overall shapes. Whenever you see something you'd like to draw or paint, remember to look at it in two ways: in one way as a subject for a picture, in the other as a combination of dark and light shapes.

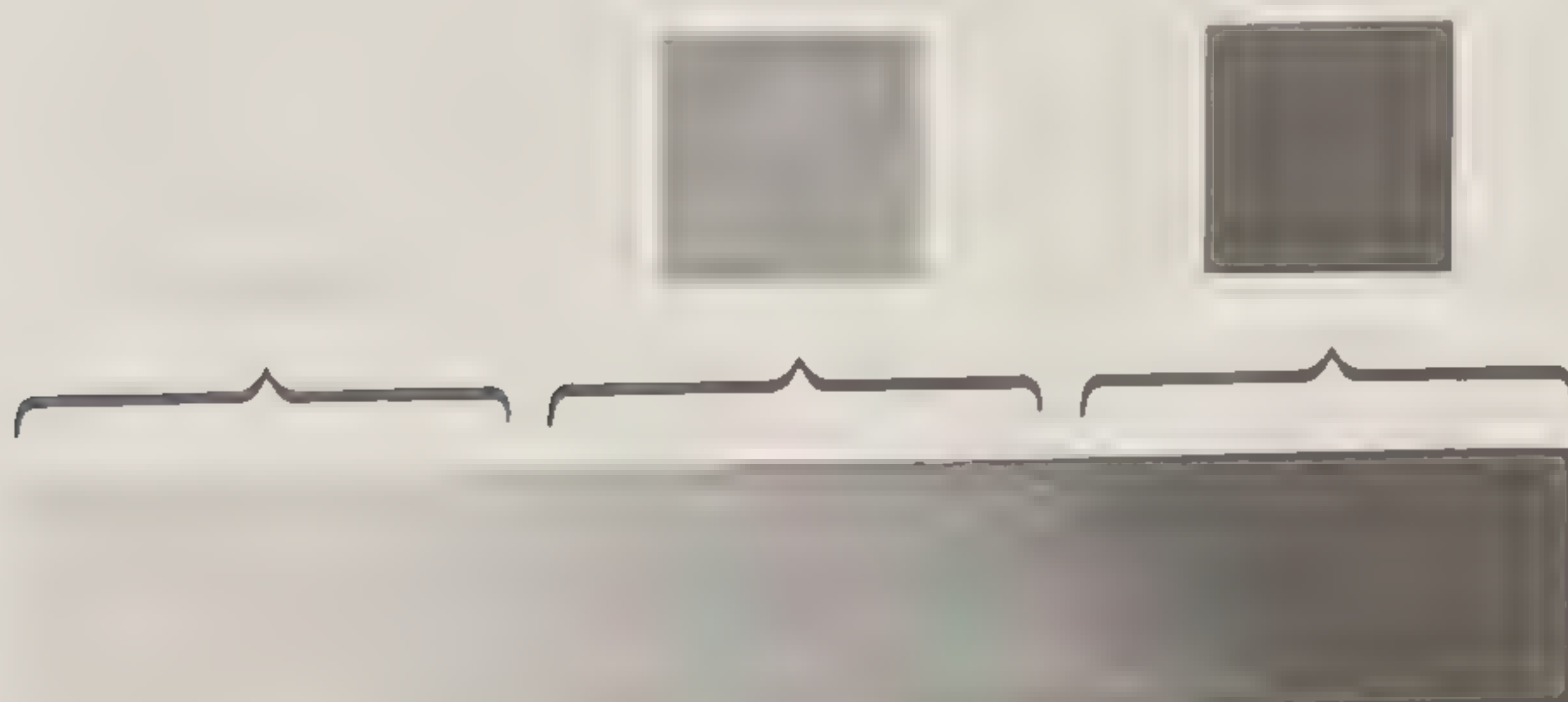


Here's one for you to try

Can you pick out the main areas of light and dark in this high-contrast, patterned photograph of a beach house? Squint your eyes at it, then diagram the arrangement of shapes you see, just as we did with the photographs on the facing page. Use any medium you like, but confine your values to white, middle-value gray and black.

If you see this picture as a pattern of one dark value and one light one, fine. If you think it breaks down into three values of white, gray and black, that's all right, too. No more than three, though—make this a simple diagram of the large, strongly contrasting shapes. You may see several subtle shadings of gray on the beach, but for this exercise, combine the similar values into one overall tone.

Look at the value bar below. In planning your diagram, decide which areas in the picture can be expressed with white, which with middle gray and which with black. If several values in an area of the photo are light, like the bracketed area on the left end of the value bar, make them white in your diagram; for those that fall in the middle range use gray and, for the dark ones, use black.



Here Robert Fawcett has taken a quiet rural scene and found in it a strong, unified arrangement of shapes. Of course, he didn't copy it exactly—he modified nature to suit his artistic purpose. Do you see how he strengthened the light areas on the ground, making them a more emphatic and exciting part of his design?





What is this shape?



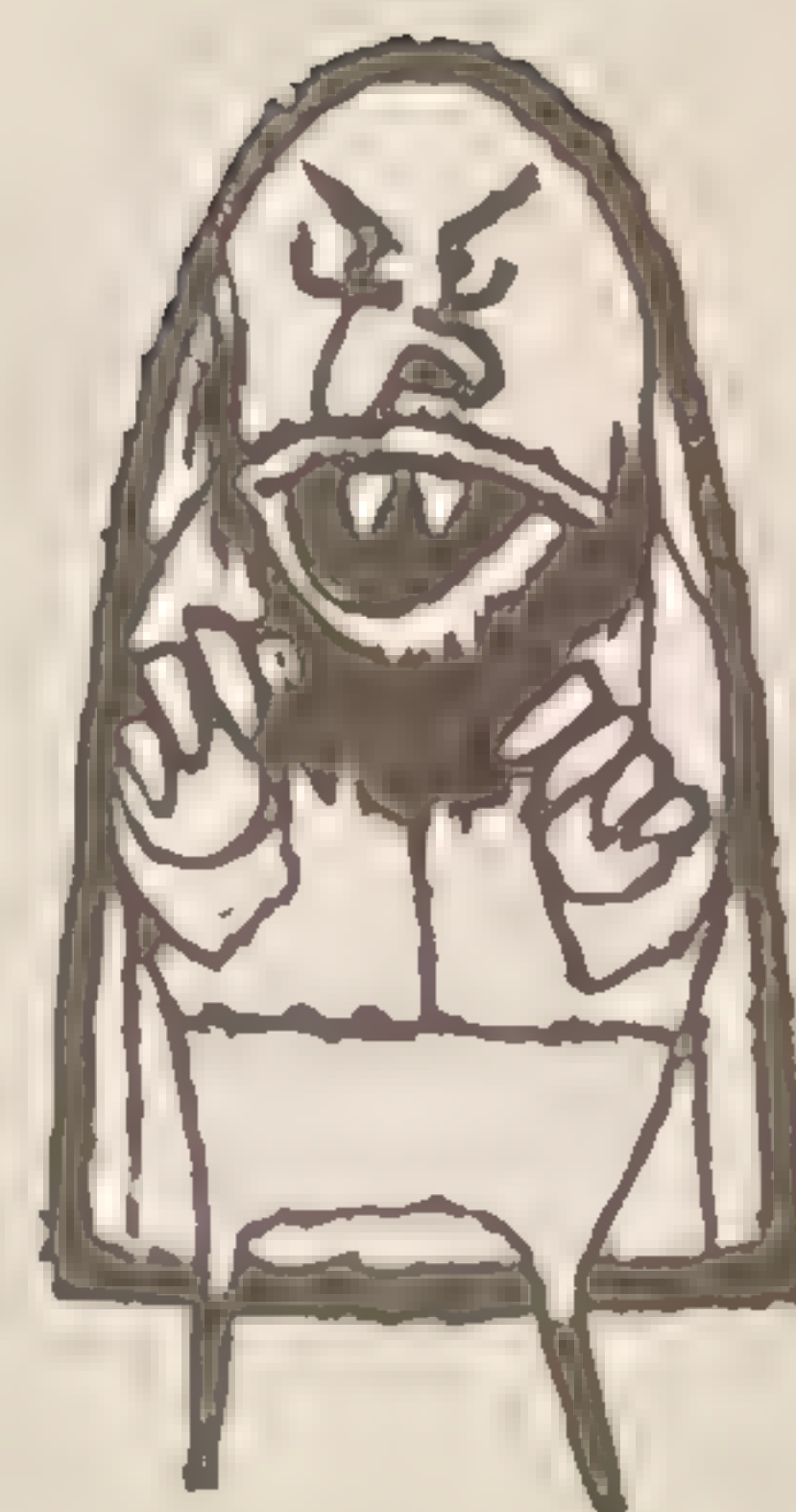
A haystack?



A bridge?



A bird?



A ——— ?



Make your shapes talk for you

That scowling little character huddled in the haystack shape above is supposed to be a fierce monster, but he doesn't look any more threatening than the sleepy-eyed bird beside him. You may think he's cute or funny, but he's surely not scary. The reason is that his *shape* doesn't help tell the story. By contrast, look at the hideous monster at left. He could frighten anyone—he looks terrifying from his fingers to the tips of his shoes. You wouldn't even need to see his fierce, mean face to know what he is, because his shape tells you.

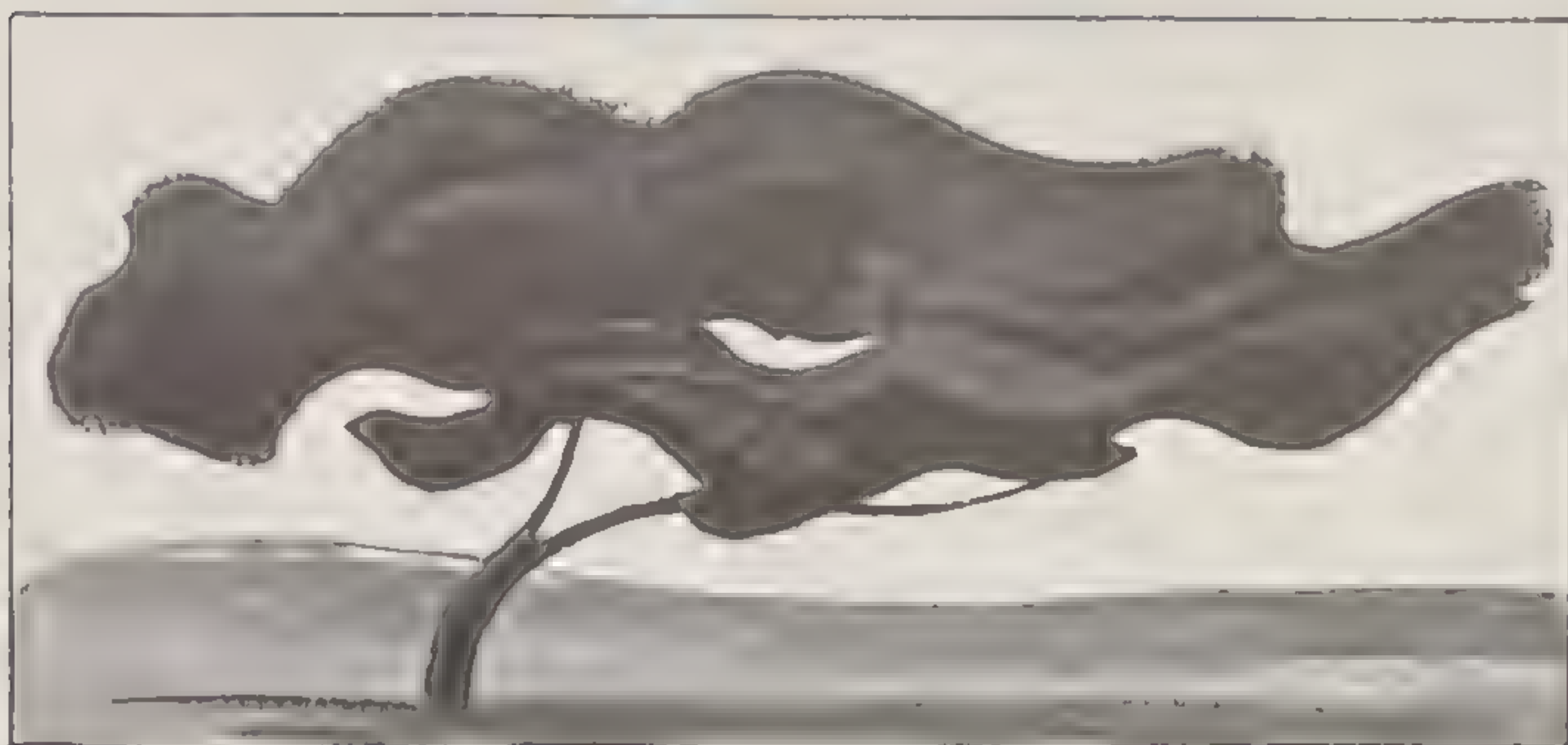
Try drawing your subject in several positions, and from different angles, until you hit on the shape that is most effective. And remember, it's just as important to draw expressive shapes for inanimate objects, like a bridge or a boulder, as it is for living, moving things.

Draw nature's shapes in your own

expressive way

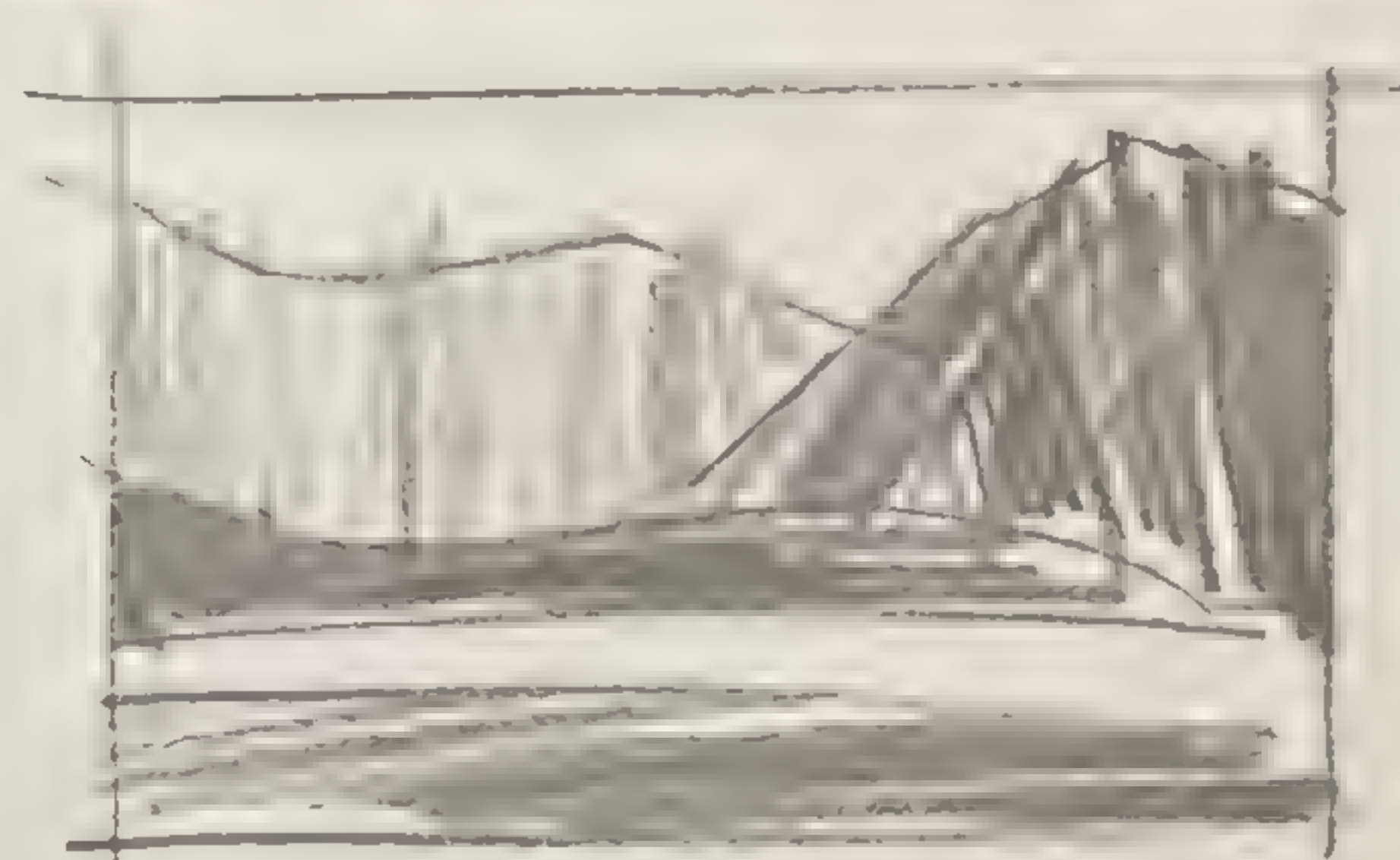
When you observe a scene, everything you put into it conveys a message you want to convey. Color, shape, texture, and value are part of your vocabulary that you speak through the language of art. That is why, when you observe a scene, you want to paint or draw, you are not just trying to change it in whatever way you see it, but you are trying to change it in your own point of view.

Look at the trees in the painting by Van Gogh's *Road with Cypress* in Figure 2 of Section 17. Turn back and look at them again. They are very expressive trees—recognizable as cypresses, but drawn in a most personal way. Van Gogh started with the shape of a cypress tree, but then exaggerated and distorted it to fit his own remarkable artistic vision. *Road with Cypresses* is a fine example of how shape, along with color, texture and value, can be made to speak eloquently in the language of art.



Do you see how these three trees express three different ideas through the shapes the artist has given them? The one above has the shape of a tree formed by the elements. The bend of the trunk, the undulating line of foliage suggest the relentless pull of wind. The tree at right above has a shape that reaches upward; we sense its youthfulness and vigor. There's a feeling of protection, or strength, in the stately tree at right below that has its source in a shape of healthy fullness and maturity.





This is the obvious compositional treatment of the scene above. It would make a lovely painting, but there are other, perhaps more exciting, things to see and paint here, too.



Look beyond the obvious

Whenever you find a scene in nature that you'd like to paint, be aware that it holds a tremendous variety of possibilities for picture compositions. When you plan your picture, don't always settle for your first impression. Perhaps, if you look beyond the obvious, you'll find other, more interesting ways of interpreting your subject.

The compositions on these pages were all inspired by the scene above, all painted by the same artist. He could have composed a landscape just as it is in the photograph and made a pleasing picture. But this time he was more interested in seeking out some of the subtler, less obvious aspects of this mountain scene. He looked at the distant peaks and found one painting in the pattern of snow, rock and shadow. He found another in the thrust and rise of the hard, sheer face of the mountain. The gentle roll of the foothills, the curving outline of the flock of sheep gave him an abstraction of soft, lyric grace. And finally, the sheep, grouped as they are, inspired him to paint a study in shapes.

When you go out to paint, jar yourself out of your usual way of seeing. Seek the fresh, unique picture subjects in nature. They're there, in plain sight, for those who know how to see beyond the obvious.



Snow cradled in the mountain folds, dark shadow and sun-bared rock are transformed in paint into a pleasant pattern of cascading positive and negative shapes.

The bold angular abstraction on the facing page was inspired by the harsh, jutting rock formations on the mountainside. Here at right is another abstraction quite different in feeling. Quiet and gentle, it is the artist's version of the curving foothills, the lake and grazing sheep. These, then, are two contrasting moods he found in the same scene.



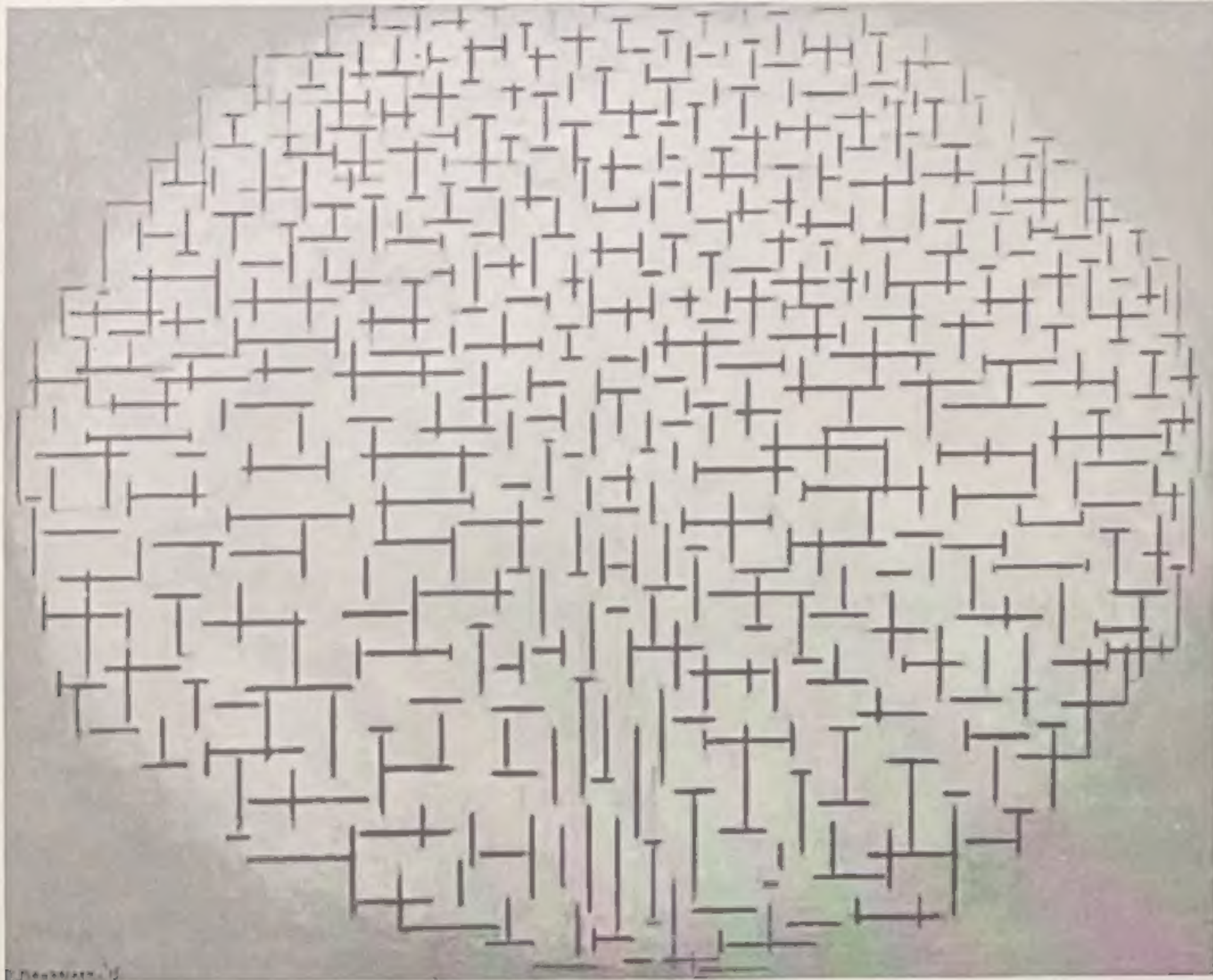
See how the horizontal shape of the picture and the horizontal shapes in the picture create a stabilizing sense of calm. The picture might be too calm — even boring — if it weren't for the touch of activity lent by the up-and-down shapes of the legs. Look for these contrasts in your subjects.



Gallery

Compositions — drawings and paintings

Composition No. 10 — Plus and Minus
Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo



Mondrian, a pioneer among abstractionists, sought beauty solely in straight lines and colors and the relations between them. This is one of his earliest pure abstractions, a solidly unified balance and harmony of vertical and horizontal lines. If you look at it for a while, you'll see it in two, then three, dimensions.

The paintings and drawings on these pages cover a span of over three hundred years, and represent widely different approaches to art. Yet all of them, from Vermeer's realistic seventeenth-century painting to Kline's contemporary work in abstract expressionism, are based on the same principles of composition you've been working with in this section. If you look carefully you'll see how each artist has related and balanced all the shapes in his picture area to create a unified design that conveys to us what he wanted to express.

Henri Matisse wrote in 1908: "I dream of an art transfusing a sense of balance, purity and calm, in which there is no discordant or worrying note." He could have been describing *Woman and Vase of Flowers*, which he drew nearly a quarter of a century later. How elegantly his line relates form to form and ties them together in a serenely balanced composition.

Untitled
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. Scull



Franz Kline, who died in 1962, was one of the group of painters called abstract expressionists. While their work is abstract, it is more emotional, freer, than the precisely ordered arrangements of such artists as Mondrian. Note the interplay of white and black shapes in this painting. Kline once said: "People sometimes think I take a white canvas and paint a black sign on it, but this is not true. I paint the white as well as the black, and the white is just as important."

Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation Collection, New York



Two Laundresses
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Howard J. Sachs



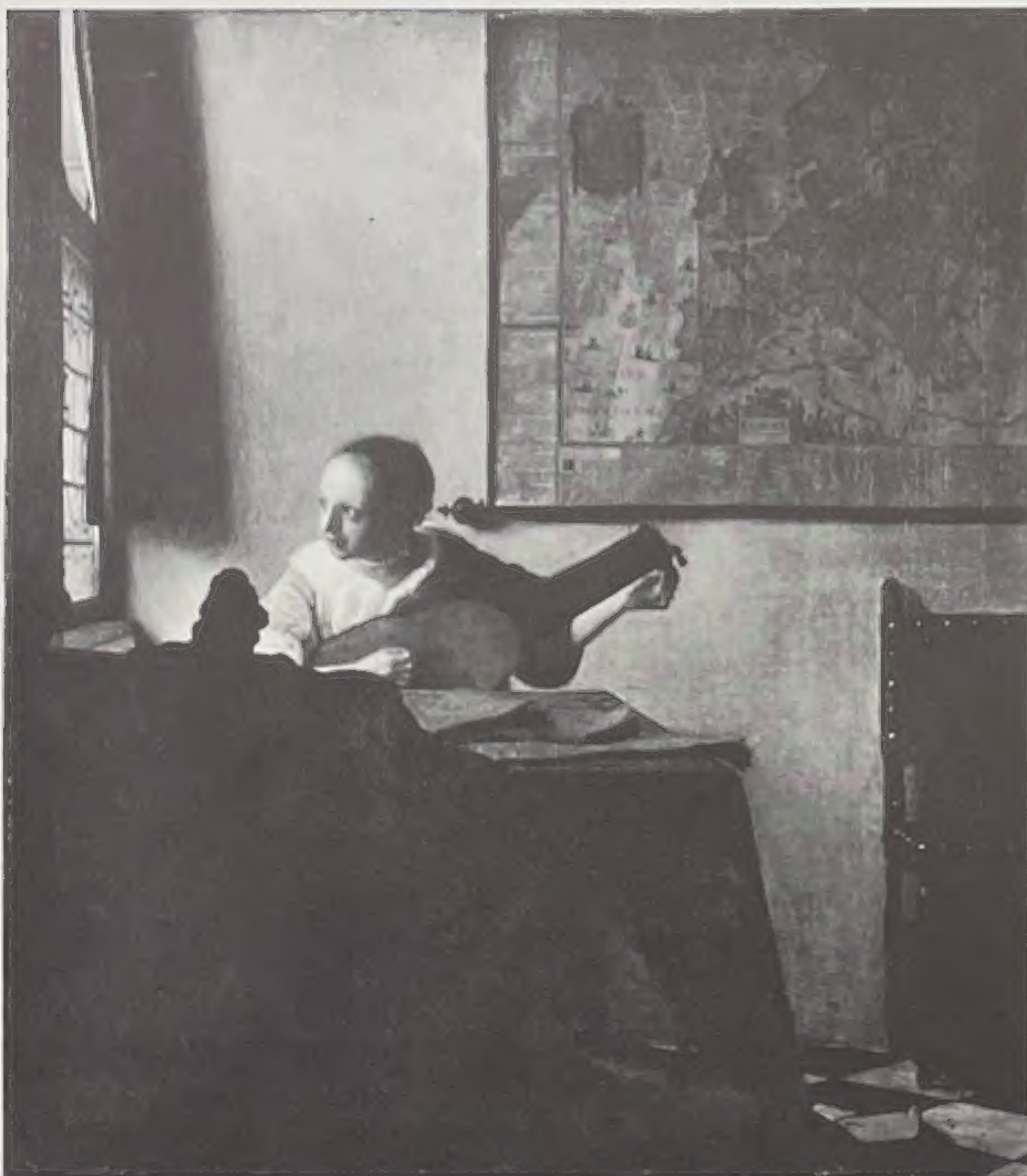
In this painting Degas imparted to two washerwomen of the Paris streets the fluid grace that characterizes the ballet dancers he painted so often. We sense, too, the brief moment of arrested movement that is in so many of his ballet paintings. Note how Degas reduced his subject to large, simple shapes, arranged in a balance that is almost, but not quite, formal.

House in the Suburbs of Paris
Museum of Fine Arts, Berne



In many of Utrillo's paintings, we find large areas of white, heightened by the contrasting dark tones that surround them. While this is a realistic street scene, you can also see clearly defined abstract shapes in the white, medium and dark areas.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Bequest of Collis P. Huntington, 1925



Vermeer lived during the seventeenth century, the richest period in the history of Dutch art. Like other painters of his time, he chose for his subject matter everyday domestic scenes of contemporary life. *Lady with a Lute* is certainly a realistic painting, yet we are aware of the artist's subtle play of light and shade, carefully arranged to help create a mood of serenity.



Put compositions in your sketchbook

Up to now you've been using your sketchbook for quick drawings and for making notes about the things that attract you. Now bring what you've learned about composition to your sketchbook. When you make studies, try putting some of them into quick little composition sketches. Don't fuss with details — these needn't be finished drawings by any means.

Remember about relating shapes, and be just as concerned with the negative areas as the positive ones. You may find that what starts as doodling will turn out to be the beginning of a picture.